'A correspondence long interrupted': Ronald Gunn re-establishes contact with Joseph Hooker in 1870

Clem Earp

16B Ebony Place, Massey, New Zealand. Email: omaiosys@yahoo.com.au

Abstract
Ronald Campbell Gunn was one of the foremost Australian plant collectors who sent specimens to William and Joseph Hooker during the first half of the nineteenth century, until he abruptly broke off all correspondence. In a letter sent to Joseph Hooker two decades later, in 1870, Gunn reveals the reasons for this hiatus, and sends specimens of Tasmanian *Acacia* species and of a New Zealand plant now known as *Phormium cookianum* subsp. *hookeri* (Gunn ex Hook. f.). Remarks in the letter on these specimens reveal a controversy with Ferdinand Mueller on definition of species, and allow correction of the erroneous locality for the *Phormium* later published by Hooker. (*The Victorian Naturalist* **131**(6), 2014, 204-208)

Keywords: biography, collectors, Ferdinand von Mueller, taxonomy, *Phormium cookianum* subsp. *hookeri*

Introduction

Ronald Campbell Gunn (1808-1881) was a prominent figure in early Tasmania, holding many important public appointments, is now better known for his contributions to Australian botany (Blackwood 2012); he sent many specimens to Sir William Hooker (1785-1865) before and after his 1841 appointment as director of the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, England, and to his son and successor Dr Joseph Dalton Hooker (1817-1911). Much of his correspondence with Sir William has been published (Burns and Skemp 1961), and selected extracts from the correspondence with Dr Hooker are also on record (Burns and Skemp 1961; Endersby 2001, 2011).

Botanical communications from Gunn to the Hookers are regarded as having ceased abruptly in 1849 or thereabouts (Burns and Skemp 1961), although Endersby (2001) gives a date of 'about 1860', and there have been speculations about the cause of this. Endersby (2001, p. 349; 2008) put forward the following:

> His growing prosperity seems to have coincided with a gradual loss of interest in botany. Perhaps managing his estates became too time-consuming. But perhaps he felt that, because he had finally become a gentleman, he no longer needed to engage in aspirational, gentlemanly pursuits.

While studying the nomenclature of New Zealand Flax (genus *Phormium*), I became aware that Gunn had sent a specimen to Joseph Hooker in 1870. When a copy of the covering letter (Gunn 1870) was obtained from the Kew Gardens archives, it became apparent that it was of much wider interest than the reason for which I requested it.

The honorifics used in this paper reflect the subjects' titles in 1870, before Joseph Hooker became Sir Joseph and Ferdinand Mueller became Baron von Mueller.

Background

Ronald Campbell Gunn first became interested in botany when assistant superintendant of convicts at Launceston, Tasmania, in the 1830s. His friend Robert Lawrence was already one of Sir William Hooker's collectors, and Gunn soon became a collector himself (Endersby 2001). After holding various positions in the judicial system, he became private secretary to the Lieutenant-Governor, Sir John Franklin, in 1840, and accompanied Sir John and his wife on several expeditions (Blackwood 2012). Also in 1840, Joseph Hooker arrived in Hobart with the Ross Antarctic Expedition; the two men became firm friends and went on collecting expeditions for specimens which were eventually used in Hooker's (1860) *Flora Tasmaniae* along with material sent to Kew by Gunn (Endersby 2001).

Gunn left the public service in 1841 and became manager of the rich Lawrence and Franklin estates. This enabled him to form the first scientific society in Australasia, eventually known as the Tasmanian Society, and publish the *Tasmanian Journal of Natural Science* to

which he contributed many papers. In 1848, however, his society was subsumed by the Royal Society of Van Diemen's Land (later, of Tasmania) and the Royal Society's *Papers and Proceedings* soon superseded the *Journal*. Gunn became a member of the Royal Society at its first meeting in 1848 (Milligan 1850) and published papers in its journal.

He was elected to the upper house of Parliament in 1855, and later to the House of Assembly, but resigned in 1860. He rejoined the public service and held numerous positions which are listed elsewhere (see Burns and Skemp 1966). One notable appointment relevant to this paper was as the Tasmanian representative on a New Zealand commission to decide a new capital for that colony.

Until 1865, the capital of New Zealand was Auckland, but agitation grew for a more central location; several towns put themselves forward, and to avoid any suspicion of favouritism, Parliament resolved to form a commission of representatives from the Australian colonies of New South Wales, Victoria and Tasmania to decide the matter (Bagnall 1985). Gunn was nominated by the Tasmanian Governor, Col. Gore-Browne. Gunn and the other commissioners arrived in New Zealand in July 1864, and issued their report in October that year, recommending Wellington become the capital, which came to pass the following year.

Discussion

The long interruption

The letter from Gunn to Hooker which renewed the correspondence (Appendix 1) suggests quite a different explanation for the hiatus in letters to Hooker from those put forward by Endersby. Far from enjoying prosperity, Gunn was experiencing ill-health and financial hardship on top of deaths of his children. All these are triggers for depression. And indeed, neglecting his correspondence demonstrates two of the overt symptoms of depression: withdrawal from contact and loss of interest in previously enjoyable things (see, for example, the website http://www.beyondblue.org.au/the-facts/depression/signs-and-symptoms, accessed 5/11/2013).

When Gunn was elected to the Tasmanian Parliament he seems to have been more conspicuous by his absences than by his contributions (Baulch 1961). Certainly, the letter makes it clear that his leaving Parliament and rejoining the public service was forced on him by circumstances. As can be seen from the biographical details above he certainly was not idle in the period 1849 to 1870 although his letter to Hooker suggests a level of depression which perhaps he kept from those around him.

The two Acacias

Gunn's characterisation of Ferdinand Mueller as a 'chamber botanist' seems unnecessarily harsh. Mueller had been an active explorer and plant collector in his youth, but by 1870 he had held a responsible position as Government Botanist for Victoria for nearly 20 years, and was producing a huge volume of published botanical work including the monumental *Flora Australiensis* in collaboration with Hooker's elder colleague at Kew, George Bentham (Home *et al.* 2002; Lucas 2003). Since 1862 his employment had been under increasing attacks which were eventually to culminate in his dismissal in 1873 (Home *et al.* 2002).

The two men kept up a correspondence throughout the period when Gunn stopped writing to the Hookers, even though they had their differences. Mueller, for example, was at that time an opponent of Darwin's theory of evolution (Home *et al.* 2002) and agreed to disagree with Gunn on such matters as fixity of species (Mueller to Gunn 6th January 1865, in Home *et al.* 2002).

Gunn's example of Mueller's conflation of distinct species is rather puzzling. The names *Acacia mollissima* (Black Wattle, currently accepted name: *A. mearnsii*) and *A. dealbata* (Silver Wattle) had been used by Hooker in his *Flora Tasmaniae* (Hooker 1860, p. 111), with the remark that the first species was,

> very similar indeed to the *A. dealbata*, and probably only a state of that plant, though looking very different when seen beside it.

The second volume of the *Flora Australiensis*, issued in 1864, placed *A. mollissima* in synonymy with *A. decurrens* or one of its varieties. As for *A. dealbata*, Bentham wrote that it 'is unhesitatingly united with *A. decurrens* by F. Mueller. J.D. Hooker considers it as sufficiently distinct, although not easy to characterize from dried specimens.' (Bentham and Mueller 1864).

But it was still listed as a separate species, with Hooker's opinion (probably communicated verbally to Bentham) overriding Mueller's.

Gunn does not seem to have been satisfied with this outcome. Perhaps he had seen something in the draft of Mueller's second volume of *Indigenous Plants of Victoria* (this volume was never published: Home *et al.* 2002). Mueller wrote to Gunn on 12 June 1867, apparently in reply to a letter from Gunn which has not survived (Home *et al.* 2002: 417-418):

> 'Acacia mollissima & A dealbata grow both here on one ridge. The difference in flowering time, which I noted for many years, arises from the very difference of locality ... My seed collector in the Garden will be asked tomorrow about the ripening of Acacia mollissima & dealbata, both common on the Yarra.'

Unfortunately the seed collector's response is not in any surviving letter either.

The question of the two acacia species had been settled in the definitive *Flora Australiensis* probably by Hooker himself, and why Gunn chose to mention Mueller's opinion is a mystery. His inclusion of details of the seeding period of the Black Wattle is also superfluous; he had previously said exactly the same in a paper on *Acacia* many years before (Gunn 1846). Hooker (1860) had cited this paper as a useful reference on the genus and would presumably remember its contents, yet Gunn's letter reads as if this characteristic of the wattle is some new item of information hitherto unknown to Hooker. Some explanation in the psychological realm must again be considered, perhaps to do with the stress of writing the preceding paragraph.

Phormium hookeri

From a purely botanical viewpoint, the most important part of the letter deals with the 'new *Phormium*' specimens which were enclosed. As stated by Hooker (1888), it was from Gunn's visit to New Zealand in 1864 as a member of the Seat of Government commission that these originate.

After arriving first at Auckland, the commission went to Wellington on a steamer which stopped at Napier for a couple of hours. Here Gunn met his New Zealand botanical counterpart, William Colenso, for the first and only time (Bagnall 1985). Colenso later mentioned the visit to Hooker, adding

> I learnt from him he had a copy of your Zoology

(Colenso to Hooker 30th November 1864, in St. George 2009: 311). As Hooker had not written any works on zoology, this remark is rather puzzling.

The commission proceeded to inspect the candidate locations by chartered steamer. Although most of the places that had put themselves forward for consideration were in the vicinity of Cook Strait, the more distant Whanganui area had also asked to be included.

The commission arrived at Whanganui on about 21 August 1864. The navigable Whanganui River was considered by the inhabitants as one of the township's natural advantages. However, some of the Māori inhabitants of the area had become members of a militant anti-Government religious cult, the Pai Mārire, who practised decapitation of their enemies, and the river formed as much a highway for them as for Government forces. In May that year, an attempt by a Pai Mārire war party to pass down the river had been blocked by local Māori at the Battle of Moutoa in which 66 lives were lost. The commission decided to investigate the situation for themselves. They first made a short trip up the river by steamer, then one or two days later Gunn and one other member went further upstream by canoe to witness a re-enactment of the battle (Bagnall 1985). Presumably it was on this second expedition that Gunn gathered plants of *Phormium* which he took back to Launceston. It is worth emphasising that this journey was by primitive transport up a river in flood, in winter weather, into an area still teeming with insurgents; the less adventurous Victorian member of the commission chose to abandon his colleagues and head for a safer part of the country (Bagnall 1985).

The specimen which Gunn sent to Hooker in 1870 consists of the top of the inflorescence, with six side branches, each bearing a number of mature capsules. A packet attached to the herbarium sheet contains loose seeds (http://apps.kew.org/herbcat/getImage.do?imageBarcode=K000644300, accessed 5/11/2013). The specimen is accompanied by a note in Gunn's handwriting:

Phormium Hookeri. Gunn 1864. 30 to 40 miles up Wanganui River, New Zealand. Growing abundantly in fissures of almost perpendicular cliffs - Habit form very different from P. tenax - plants hanging downwards - Native name Tiwai Kapu. Found by Ronald C. Gunn in 1864. Plants taken to Tasmania where it flowers well.

The last sentence indicates the note was written in 1870, not 1864, and thus it is more likely than not that the specimen is from Gunn's garden. In another hand is written: 'From Ron. Gunn 9/70'.

Hooker did not use the specimen which Gunn had sent, but he did add it to the Kew herbarium. Many years later Hooker observed similar plants, grown from seed sent from the Whanganui district, in his brother-in-law's garden at Torquay, England, and with these live specimens available decided to publish a new species which, remembering Gunn's request, he called *Phormium hookeri* Gunn, citing the note (Hooker, 1888). The plant is now known as *Phormium cookianum* Le Jol. subsp. *hookeri* (Gunn ex Hook. f.) Wardle (1979).

However, in the published description, Hooker stated 'the locality in which Mr. Gunn found it was the Waitangi river'. This is evidently a typographic error; it is not the only one, as the genus *Phormium* is ascribed to a non-existent author 'Font.' rather than to 'Forst.'. The erroneous locality has been maintained by later researchers such as Wardle (1979).

Aftermath

Whether Gunn's letter was the start of any further correspondence will be left to future researchers. Burns and Skemp (1961) have suggested that if there were any later letters they may have lacked significant botanical content and were therefore placed among Hooker's personal letters rather than in the Kew archives. Gunn certainly corresponded with other European botanists in this late period; a letter from JG Agardh to Mueller in 1872 (Home *et al.* 2002) mentions that Gunn had sent him a collection of Tasmanian algae.

Gunn's rheumatism worsened. By 1876 he was unable to write so much as his own name (Burns and Skemp 1966), and retired from the public service. It became so bad that for the last two years of his life he was unable even to move unassisted (Baulch 1961).

In his obituary of Gunn, Hooker (1882) mentioned Gunn's visit to New Zealand and that his 'health broke down under the close confinement and long hours of office work at Hobarton', but this and many other details seem to have been merely copied from a newspaper obituary (e.g. *Launceston Examiner* of 14 March 1881 which has the same wording in many places).

This letter gives a first-hand glimpse into Ronald Campbell Gunn's later life, with a subjective view that is altogether missing from the rather dry biographies (Baulch 1961; Burns and Skemp 1966; Buchanan 1990).

Acknowledgements

I gratefully acknowledge permission from the Archives, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew to publish the contents of Gunn's letter. Sally Stewart (Royal Botanic Gardens, Melbourne) and Rod Home (Correspondence of Ferdinand von Mueller Project) kindly searched (unsuccessfully) for further letters between Gunn and Mueller on the *Acacia* controversy. An anonymous referee provided very helpful suggestions to improve the manuscript.

References

Bagnall AG (1985) The Seat of Government Commission, 1864: an Australian intervention. *Turnbull Library Record* **18**, 5–21.

Baulch W (1961) Ronald Campbell Gunn. In Burns and Skemp (1961), pp. xiii–xix.

Bentham G and Mueller F (1864) *Flora Australiensis. Vol. II. Leguminosae to Combretaceae.* (Lovell Reeve: London)

Blackwood L (2012) The contribution of Ronald Campbell Gunn to our knowledge of the flora and fauna of Tasmania. *La Trobeana* **11 (3)**, 30–36.

Buchanan A (1990) Ronald Campbell Gunn (1808-1881). In *A history of systematic botany in Australasia: proceedings of a symposium held at the University of Melbourne, 25-27 May 1988*, pp. 179–192. Ed P Short. (Australian Systematic Botany Society: South Yarra)

Burns T and Skemp J (eds) (1961) *Van Diemen's Land correspondents: letters from R.C. Gunn, R.W. Lawrence, Jorgen Jorgenson, Sir John Franklin and others to Sir William J. Hooker, 1827–1849.* (Queen Victoria Museum: Launceston).

Burns T and Skemp J (1966) Ronald Campbell Gunn. In *Australian Dictionary of Biography. Vol. 1: 1788–1850 A-H*, pp. 492–493. (Melbourne University Press: Carlton)

Endersby J (2001) 'From having no herbarium.' Local knowledge versus Metropolitan Expertise: Joseph Hooker's Australasian Correspondence with William Colenso and Ronald Gunn. *Pacific Science* **55**, 343–358.

Endersby J (2008) *Imperial Nature: Joseph Hooker and the practices of Victorian Science.* (Chicago University Press: Chicago)

Endersby J (2011) A life more ordinary: the dull life but interesting times of Joseph Dalton Hooker. *Journal of the History of Biology* **44**, 611–631.

Gunn RC (1846) Notes on the *Acaciae* of Tasmania. *Tasmanian Journal of Natural Science* **3**, 5-17.

Gunn RC (1870) Letter to J.D. Hooker, 2 May 1870. Directors' Correspondence vol. 172 f. 234. (Unpublished: Royal Botanic Gardens Kew Archives)

Home RW, Lucas AM, Maroske S, Sinkora DM and Voigt JH (eds) (2002). *Regardfully yours: selected correspondence of Ferdinand von Mueller, vol. 2: 1860–1875.* (Peter Lang: Bern)
Hooker JD (1860) *The botany of the Antarctic voyage of H.M. discovery ships Erebus and Terror in the years 1839-1843 : under the command of Captain Sir James Clark Ross. Part III. Flora Tasmaniae. Vol. I. Dicotyledons.* (Lovell Reeve: London)
Hooker JD (1882) [Obituary:] Ronald Campbell Gunn. *Proceedings of the Royal Society of London* **34**, xiii–xv.
Hooker JD (1888) *Phormium hookeri. Curtis's Botanical Magazine* **114**, t. 6973.
Lucas AM (2003) Assistance at a distance: George Bentham, Ferdinand von Mueller and the production of *Flora australiensis*. *Archives of Natural History* **30**, 255–281.
Milligan J (1850) Proceedings. *Papers and Proceedings of the Royal Society of Van Diemen's Land* **1**, 154–178.
St George IM (ed) (2009) *Colenso's collections including the unpublished work of the late Bruce Hamlin on William Colenso's New Zealand plants held at Te Papa.* (New Zealand Native Orchid Group: Wellington)
Wardle P (1979) Variation in *Phormium cookianum* (Agavaceae). *New Zealand Journal of Botany* **17**, 189–196.

Received 7 November 2013; accepted 3 July 2014

Appendix 1. The letter of RC Gunn to W Hooker

Launceston Tasmania,
2nd May 1870.

My dear Hooker,
I take the opportunity of my son John Jamieson Gunn going to England to study medicine to resume a correspondence long interrupted, from various causes, on my part, by commending him to your tender care as a stranger in a strange land, and to say that any kindness you can show him will be gratefully appreciated by me.
Domestic affliction in the loss of child after child at all ages up to 28. Heavy pecuniary losses, (some £20,000.) and subsequently broken health – made me shirk all correspondence. I had to re-enter the Govt. Service, and again become a drudge – worse off in 1870 than I was in 1840! Rheumatism has now crippled my right arm so that I write with difficulty. All these are apologies which you must take for what they are worth.
My friend Mr Mueller of Melbourne is knocking down all the old specific landmarks – the effect of being what I call a chamber botanist working in many cases with a limited number of specimens. And furnishing work for future laborers to restore nine tenths to their old places and stations! A field botanist would draw different conclusions. e.g. Acacia dealbata & A. mollissima, of which I now send you specimens. One flowers in August & ripens its fruit in Dec; - the other flowers in Dec - & ripens its fruit the year after – that is it takes 13 months!! This peculiarity of taking over a year applies to some other (Australian) sp. although I do not think Mueller notices it.
I send you specimens of a new Phormium found by me growing in fissures of nearly perpendicular cliffs up the Wanganui River, N.Z., some 30 or 40 miles. It is not P. Colensoi I imagine. Leaves not erect, but like large plants of Hemerocallis flava. Spikes of flowers hang downwards, and fruit is pendulous. It is a beautiful small species now thriving in my garden. If new pray call it at my request P. Hookeri. The fibre is very tough. Maori name is "Tiwai Kapu" and they told me it was very superior to & more valued than the common flax, which grew below it on the margin of the river. Let me know if there is anything you specially want – as I shall try to send it.
Believe me always

Most sincerely yours
Ronald C Gunn
